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**‘I just want to be left alone’: novel sociological insights into dramaturgical
demands on professional athletes**

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Abstract

To date, no sociological studies of professional athletes have investigated the lived experiences of sportspeople in highly publicly-visible occupations that provide relatively few opportunities for back-stage relaxation from role demands. Drawing on findings from a British Academy-funded project examining high-profile sports workers, and employing Goffman’s dramaturgical insights, this article provides a novel examination of high-profile athletes who work in highly publicly visible contexts. This working context can render them ‘open’ persons in interactional situations. To explore this sociologically significant occupational domain, interviews were conducted with 26 UK-based professional athletes (female and male) from seven different sports. For these athletes, dramaturgical demands were found to be relentless and unremitting, as back-stage regions proved so challenging to access.

Key words

Dramaturgical approach, Goffman, front stage and back stage, front region, professional athletes, social interaction

Introduction

In this article, drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical approach, we explore the under-researched domain of professional sportspeople's experiences of working in a highly visible occupational role, where 'front-region' control can be highly problematic and challenging. Highly visible professional athletes can encounter routine subjection to quasi 'boundary-less' public exposure and scrutiny as a structural feature of their lived experience of employment. Whilst other occupational groups are situated in contexts open to public scrutiny, here we focus on the specifics of the interactional challenges wrought by the heightened public visibility of professional athletes. We report key findings from a qualitative study into the lived experiences of 26 UK-based professional athletes (both female and male), the nature of whose work often challenges traditional understandings of the workplace and the interface between putatively public (front region) and private (back region) spheres. For Goffman (1974: 109), 'A region may be defined as any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception', although such 'boundedness' may vary greatly, according to the perceptual mode(s) utilized. Goffman (1974) provides the example of a broadcasting control room that isolates a region orally but not visually. We discuss regions in more depth in the conceptual framework section below, but first note that 'front-region control' relates to an individual's ability to control the composition of her or his audiences, the role played by audiences, and how audiences relate to the interactional performances being given (Lawler, 2008).

The 'regional' aspects of workers' everyday working routines have been sociologically explored via a range of different theoretical lenses, with the micro-level of analysis featuring strongly in accounts, for example, of the emotional labor required of workers performing in various front regions where (often intense)

customer relational work is required. In her groundbreaking interactionist analysis of the emotional labor of airline attendants, Hochschild (1983) coined the term ‘emotional labor’ to describe emotion management strategies used by airline attendants within the front region of their workplace during face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the customer, to produce an emotional state in the customer and to manage their own emotions and expressions. In contrast, in the non-public areas of the airplane, such as the cockpit or mini kitchen, the airline attendants were free to engage in less formal and more relaxed ‘back-stage’ behavior with their colleagues. Other examples of studies of employees’ front- and back-stage behavior include police negotiators talking with those at risk of suicide (Stokoe and Sikveland, 2019), the nature of collaborative interprofessional relations in acute care settings (Lewin and Reeves, 2011), and how healthcare professionals engage with surveillance at the micro-level of interaction (Visser et al., 2018).

Analyses of work at the employee-customer interface have tended to focus on occupational roles that are ‘situated’ in terms of taking place in spatio-temporally bounded regions, and are often positioned at the lower levels of a ‘service’ work hierarchy (Cutcher and Atchel, 2017). Interactive performances, in terms of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), for instance, tend to be directed towards relatively well-defined customers, clients, or service-users in specific locations.

Examining the occupational work of high-profile professional athletes offers a sociologically important and novel contrast to interactive service workers such as sales assistants, nurses and social workers, due to the athletes’ highly visible frontline social selves being routinely subject to penetrating workplace scrutiny (Roderick, 2014) in concert with intense fascination with, even a voyeurism towards, their public and private lives (Cashmore, 2014; Smart 2005). These individuals’ sporting

accomplishments, career journeys, leisure time activities, and personal lives are routinely in the spotlight of media attention. Professional athletes are not of course unique in this respect, but the unrelenting nature of public exposure can engender a feeling that their ‘private’ *personal identity* is routinely ‘contaminated’ by the demands of their *social identity* as a highly visible professional sportsperson. The tensions individuals experience between their social identity (attributed to them by others, both significant and more generalized) and their personal identity (attributed to the self by the social actor her/himself) are sociologically significant, particularly when the personal and the social come into conflict (Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2007). Furthermore, professional sportspeople are rarely conceptualized by the public as anything other than very privileged in terms of their working conditions, with their work being constructed as *a labour of love* (Roderick, 2006). To study these athletes’ experiences, here we explore a range of themes linking to the various and fluid meanings associated with regions, and perceptions of regional boundaries and related social performances: which Goffman (1974) terms the control of ‘front region’ and ‘back region’.

Conceptual framework

For Goffman (1974) and for symbolic interactionists more generally, in social situations involving two or more social actors coming to a shared definition of the situation is key to sustaining social order, as each actor seeks to persuade others of the ‘correctness’ of her or his interpretation and definition of the situation. For Goffman, therefore, front-region control is crucial for social actors who seek to impose their definition of the situation and to control how the audience for their front-stage performances relates to the performance being given (Lawler, 2015). A social actor

may seek to present very different performances to different audiences; for example, presenting as a confident, articulate, knowledgeable academic in front of an audience comprised of students, but presenting a rather different role performance when meeting non-academic friends in a downtown bar. An inability or compromised ability to control one's front-stage performance and ensure a plausible definition of the situation can be highly discomfoting for social actors. As Goffman (1974: 137) argues: 'Incapacity to maintain this control leaves the performer not knowing what character he [sic] will have to project from one moment to the next, making it difficult for him [sic] to effect a dramaturgical success in any one of them'. Inopportune dramaturgical trouble may result from a lack of front-region control. Individuals often attempt to keep separate their key audiences, to avoid any challenges to dramaturgical loyalty; but if scheduling of performances breaks down, there may be few opportunities to 'extricate oneself psychologically and physically' from one front region while readjusting to another (Goffman, 1974: 138). The notion of performance regions as a conceptual framework to explore occupational and workplace experiences is highly salient in the current research for two specific reasons.

First, Goffman's framework offers a mechanism to help comprehend the experiences of those who work in highly-visible, public-facing roles, many of whom could be defined as 'public figures', and may experience difficulties in disconnecting themselves from front regions and locating back regions (Rockwell and Giles, 2009) that offer a more private place for off-stage relaxation. Goffman (1974) describes regions as sites for role performances, emphasizing these as sense-boundaries (rather than necessarily physical-spatial boundaries). He emphasizes the blurred and often changeable, fluid 'ownership' of space (for example in workplaces where shift work prevails, so that one crew or team takes over the space at different temporal points).

Much research has examined occupations and labor where front and back regions are spatially bounded, for example in the contexts of: operating theatres (Tanner and Timmons, 2000), hospital wards (Lewin and Reeves, 2011) and within taxi driver networks (Ross, 2007). Furthermore, in these studies, inter-worker interactions are often discernible in shared but relatively ‘private’ (that is, away from customers, clients, patients) workspaces and thus they infer a form of back-stage order (Lewin and Reeves, 2011). These types of quasi-private spaces are themselves rarely considered places for strategic interaction, not usually being deemed spaces subject to front-region control. From a Goffmanesque perspective, however, researchers must subject to critical reflection their own assumptions regarding what constitute front stage and back stage for individuals, and the extent to which back-stage interaction is really ‘private’ (Tanner and Timmons, 2000). ‘Back-stagedness’ is relative, and highly complex, as we discuss below. Analogous to our findings, Curry (2001: 340), for example, recognizes the fluid nature of ‘regionalization’ in becoming cognizant that changing rooms/locker rooms can constitute a front region for sportspeople:

When I conducted the locker room study, I assumed it was the back-stage region for the team. Later, I learned that the locker room itself could be considered a performance area, and the back stages for the locker room were local bars and off-campus apartments.

The high-profile athletes in the current study similarly described having to perform to others in the changing-room context, as we portray below. We thus need to be attentive to, and seek to explore and understand, the way in which performers

themselves make sense of these social spaces, rather than imposing pre-defined spatial categories.

Second, the idea of front-region control is sometimes employed in relation to Goffman's (1961) analysis of 'role distance', when social actors distance themselves from a particular role at a specific time and for a purpose, often in front of a particular audience. To draw again on the example of academics, as a member of an informal 'pub quiz' team, one may wish to distance oneself from the role of 'knowledgeable expert' to avoid social pressure to perform, and in order to enjoy a relaxing evening with friends. Well-known professional athletes, however, may struggle to communicate and interact in ways that do not make ongoing reference to their high-profile occupational identity. These athletes may thus enjoy celebrity or notoriety to some extent, but may feel equally and simultaneously constrained and, for some, disillusioned, by a lack of alternative 'authentic' recognition (Roderick, 2014), and relatedly by the relative lack of opportunity for athletic-role distancing, and the presentation of other selves.

Back regions are interactionally significant places for Goffman (1974), as social spaces where actors can relax pre- and post-performance, away from the front-stage performance demands, and also rehearse, mentally and physically prepare for their front-stage performances. For the elite athletes studied, however, the difficulty of securing access to the 'safe haven' of a back region emerged as highly salient, as we consider below. First, we delineate the research project from which our data are drawn.

Methods

This article stems from a British Academy funded project examining the effects of public recognition on the private sense of self of high-profile UK sports workers. As part of the project, 26 semi-structured interviews were undertaken over a fieldwork period of 18 months with a purposive sample constructed of male (18) and female (8) full-time, UK-based professional athletes from seven sports. The underpinning drive was to investigate how these sportspeople experienced work-role visibility. The criteria for selection of participants were that interviewees were 1) current professional athletes; 2) had been written about in the UK national press; 3) were generally recognisable when in the ‘public eye’ (we acknowledge the difficulty of operationalizing this criterion). Participants were recruited via two principal means. First, gatekeepers and UK wide research networks that were developed during previous research projects, were targeted, and all agreed to offer assistance in identifying potential interviewees. Second, letters were sent to a small number of professional athletes in a range of sports, all of whom had a connection or affiliation to the North East of England, where the research was undertaken: the authors had not encountered any interviewee previously, although knowledge of them was publicly and widely accessible. Given the need to preserve the anonymity of participants, we provide details only of the sport played alongside the data extracts below. Indicating even basic demographic information such as gender and age would risk identifying these high-profile athletes (Anthony and Danaher, 2016).

Qualitative data were collected via a semi-structured interview approach, designed to uncover the lived experiences of professional athletes ‘at work’; interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. In constructing the interview schedule, an emphasis was placed on conceptual ideas related to ‘space’, ‘place’, ‘identity’, and ‘emotional

performances’. Interviews were based around a series of general questions grouped into four basic areas:

1. What meanings did athletes attribute to their sport / was sport ‘work’ for them?
2. Could athletes find anyone who understood the meanings they attached to their sport / work?
3. When/where were athletes (not) ‘at work’?
4. How did athletes experience being / performing in public?

Questions that addressed ‘what athletes understand being *at work* to mean’ were important, since a sub-goal of the wider project was to uncover if, where and how ‘work’ – their paid employment – spilled over to other realms of their lives and how, on an everyday basis, they dealt with such ‘contamination’ (Finch, 1983).

All research participants were assured of data confidentiality and protection of anonymity, and were told that neither they, nor any club or organization with which they were involved, would be identified in project outputs. Consequently, every effort has been made to strip away identifiers in the data excerpts that follow. Having previously undertaken research with professional athletes, the first author was mindful of the sensitivities bound up in their work experiences, their fears of being publicly exposed in a negative manner, and their understandable reservations of ‘giving something of themselves’ to an unknown researcher.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were read repeatedly to immerse the first author in the data and to identify salient themes. The second author supported the extended process of organizing and interpreting data and themes and the overall writing process. Research participants were asked to review their

transcripts and to make changes if they perceived any inaccuracies; none requested any changes. Commensurate with an interactionist theoretical perspective generally, this aligns well with Goffman's focus upon the importance of social actors' definition of the situation. We were thus interested in the athletes' interpretive work concerning their interactional experiences and how they perceived and defined front and back regions, and described their front-stage and back-stage performances (although this specific terminology was not used in the interviews). The interpretative process involved a continual, rigorous and reflective back and forth movement between transcripts, conceptual development, and the identification and consideration of themes and sub-themes. As with much qualitative data analysis, there was no clear, definitive end point to the interpretive work of coding and analysis. Even at the writing-up stage, it remains a concern that the feelings of interviewees have been captured accurately and faithfully, and the themes described and theorized appropriately.

We have sought to utilize segments of data that are representative (in a general sense) of the data set upon which this analysis rests. The particular quotes used are therefore those that resonate most strongly with the overall points made by participants across the range of interviews. Whilst, in line with much qualitative research, positivist concepts of evaluation criteria such as validity, reliability and generalizability are not appropriate to a qualitative study of this nature, nevertheless the criterion of analytic generalizability (see Smith, 2018) is germane. Found consistently across all the interviews was a strong sense of athletes' concern with their presentation of self, in combination with the fluid character of their 'workplace' and its nebulous boundaries. The notion of performance regions was clearly identified in the data and constitutes the focus of the current article in relation to the experiences of

professional athletes. We first consider, therefore, what actually constitute front regions for these athletes and how they experienced the demands of front-stage performance.

Working the front stage

For Goffman (1974), ‘front-stage’ behavior occurs when individuals engage actively in social performances for specific ‘public’ audiences; for example, in the front region of a retail outlet where sales assistants engage with customers. Numerous forms of employment and work are explicitly public-facing and some are highly visible in the sense that members of the public can view and comment on the quality and value of this work. Professional sportswomen and sportsmen have long dealt with the highs and lows of performing to a (usually paying) audience, routinely bracing up to crowd scrutiny and fluctuating whims. When playing or participating, the athlete (and her/his body) is often subject to public exposure from which there is little or no hiding place or escape route during the performance, whether the scrutinizing ‘eye’ is directly human or via the camera lens. As one participant, a netball player, noted: ‘the camera ... it’s right there [puts hand in front of face]. So if you’re getting shouted at, it’s all very public, you’re kind of getting publicly told-off for everyone to see’. For interviewees, being front stage and in the spotlight had become familiar terrain, a normalized aspect of their occupational role. Many discussed the routine openness of their performance and work-rate to public scrutiny and review. A cricketer, for example, noted how being open to people’s scrutiny and comments was an integral part of working-life, which was not restricted to the field of play:

When you're not doing well, you get people that will have digs, or I will go back to the village I come from and any Tom, Dick or Harry will comment on my livelihood. That's quite strange. And also, if you're fielding, there are people, if you're at an away ground, that are pissed and they are heckling you. And you wouldn't do that walking down the street to someone would you? Like, someone in a suit, with a briefcase. You wouldn't just start *yobbing* them, so that's a bit strange to get used to.

Another cricketer expressed similar feelings, and was explicit about coming to accept and normalize such scrutiny as part and parcel of work and working-life:

People aren't shy of an opinion ... it used to affect me and piss me off, but there's so much positive that comes with what you do, that you've got to realise that if Joe Bloggs is paying 15 quid to come in on Friday night and has four or five beers, he's totally within his rights to have an opinion. If he doesn't feel like I'm putting a shift in or adding value ... If he wants to tell me then ... I think you've got to respect that.

Such openness to heckling and other, sometimes highly impolite 'street remarks' and gestures (see also Gardner, 1980), resonates with Goffman's (1974) notion of being a situationally 'open person', to whom the usual courtesy of 'civil inattention' (discussed below) in public places is not accorded.

There was a sense for all interviewees that attracting the attention of sports fans and enthusiasts was a normalized, anticipated condition of work. In all social spaces

there was a potential for interactional exchanges focusing on athletes' performances at work, as a rugby player highlighted:

I've got a very big family ... they all go watch. My home life was very much... If we played a game on the Friday and I went round to my mom the day after, the first thing that anybody would mention to me is the game ... and somebody else would come through the door and they'd speak about the game not knowing that I just spoke about the game with somebody else. And then somebody else comes in through the door and they mention the game. And that became the norm. I never got to that stage where I was tearing my hair out. I knew what was going to happen and I should probably learn to deal with it.

Athletes identified the routine ways in which their front-stage performances were subject, ritually and repeatedly, to post-event review, and in this connection a cricketer said 'I don't think you can give too much away'. Similar to the golfers examined in Carless and Douglas (2009), who did not feel able to voice more authentic thoughts in public arenas, this cricketer went on to discuss conversational strategies in responding to media questions, and seeking to maintain 'information preserve' (Goffman, 1976), in relation to information about self (and team-mates). As the interviewee recounted in relation to a team-mate: 'his answers are just deadpan ... It's almost like he was scripted by someone. You know he's not going to say anything interesting'.

Not only was management of verbal communication self-monitored as part of athletes' front-stage performance, body language was similarly tightly self-regulated

and managed as part of their ‘presentational labour’ (Sheane, 2012). As another cricketer remarked:

I definitely self-police my body language because I know I notice it in other people ... Whether I’m thinking about something wholly unrelated to cricket, I want you to have the impression that what I’m doing is the most important thing in the world. Because you’ve paid your money ... as soon as you cross the ropes, even for training or for matches I assume people are watching me.

In addition to comments from co-present audiences in front regions, all participants identified the way in which social media constituted a further mechanism for providing comment on and critique of their performanceⁱ. A footballer, for example, noted how they considered that such social media commentary, both positive and negative, had become normalized as part of professional footballers’ occupational role:

I’ve had people on Twitter saying, essentially, ‘pull your finger out’ ... everyone’s entitled to their opinion ... If you want the accolades when you’ve done well, you’ve got to respect that you’re going to get a few bullets fired at you when you’re not doing well.

The above participant recounted with relative equanimity encountering negative feedback from fans and other commentators as part and parcel of their occupational role and front-stage performance work. Often viewing fans as paying customers, part

of broader market-driven relationships, our data indicate that athletes use front-stage performances to help address the various forms of ‘coercive affection’ (Wacquant, 1995) in which they are embroiled. By generating a fitting front-region working self, athletes both rationalize and undertake the face-work required to deal with the abusive behavior directed towards them, in order to exhibit an obligatory commitment to their work and to dominant performance narratives. Relatedly, we next consider the presentational work often required of professional athletes in more back-stage regions, drawing on Goffman’s concept of civil inattention (1972).

Civil inattention and uncivil attention

Whilst the focus and comments on their sporting performance seemed understandable to interviewees as a consequence of their occupational role, the treatment of them as ‘open persons’ (Goffman, 1972) even when away from front-stage sporting performances emerged strongly in the interviews. This highlights the breaching of the social norm of ‘civil inattention’ in Goffman’s (1972) terms; a norm applied to relations between strangers’ encounters in public places, whereby social actors usually glance at each other briefly and then swiftly avert their gaze. Making initial eye contact ritually acknowledges the presence of the other person, but the rapid shifting of the gaze away from her/him indicates that the other is not the focus of our undue attention, and thus not liable to find her/himself the target of unwanted conversation or other forms of interaction. For interviewees, however, such norms were often breached, so that they found themselves subject to *civil attention*, but also sometimes, to *uncivil attention* (see also Allen-Collinson, 2008). A rugby player reported attracting civil attention when not just one, but sometimes many strangers would be highly vocal in identifying and rendering socially their visible presence:

So now we're probably at 20 or 30 or 40 out of a 100 heads would turn and they would recognise me. It's not everyone, it's not every time, but even meeting you in the bar probably half that bar went 'wow! [player name] has just walked in the room', which does take some getting used to.

Subsequent to attracting such attention, this player acknowledged that most people would usually not follow up with further interaction, although a minority would prolong the interactional encounter by asking for an autograph or requesting a photo:

90% of the time people don't say anything anyway. They just turn to look. ... 10% of the time people come up and they'll ask for an autograph or a photo ... so it's rarely anything other than positive.

Relatedly, Goffman (1967) utilizes the concept of 'cognitive recognition' vis-a-vis the way an individual 'places' or identifies another, connecting the sighting of a person with a stock of knowledge regarding them. All participants described finding themselves in exposed situations, feeling a role obligation to respond politely to social encounters with unknown others. While the comments from the rugby player above portray impromptu meetings as usually courteous and unfolding in accordance with a sense of moral order, other less civil encounters were also reported. A footballer, for example, recounted less courteous encounters with strangers, and the necessary preparedness required of high-profile sportspeople to be alert to uncivil attention directed not only towards them, but also at their significant others:

If I see them recording my kids, I will say something. I keep it polite, you know, ‘listen I prefer you to erase what's on your phone with my kids’. That's all I ask. With *me*, whatever, I can't stop it. And, most of the time, they're alright. Occasional time they come, they tell me to go *fuck off*. If they do, they do. You know, you can't control what people do. But like I said, you can stick to your morals. I'm not going to fight with them ... [pauses] ... My wife would fight with them.

Similarly discussing negative interactional encounters, a cricketer noted how the club – their employers – explicitly addressed the necessity for players always to be mindful of their public-figure role and presentation of self: ‘One of the pre-season slide shows that the management put together was saying how you do represent the club 24/7. You are a [team] player 24/7 and we expect you to carry on like that’. The notion of an ever-present demand for a positive presentation of self and thereby ‘representation of club’ was widely reported in the interviews, requiring a form of *hypervigilance* of self-presentation.

Despite such vigilance, and however hard the athletes worked at their presentation of self, many participants described the bad-faith activities of some sections of the media and the ways in which they sought to undermine athletes’ self-presentations via publication of falsehoods and ‘mis-presentations’:

.. in [European football club], it was incredible, their paparazzi stayed outside your house almost 24/7. As a foreign player there, you went anywhere, it was in the newspaper and they would make up stuff. I

walked into training one day, and everyone said, ‘oh, congratulations on your marriage’. I didn't even have a girlfriend at the time.

Although not all athletes reported encountering such intense media interest, a telling comment was made by another footballer who, like others, described feeling exposed to what we might term a panoptic gaze, required to act at almost all times as if they were in the camera lens, whether or not this were the case: ‘I just assume that every time I'm out, somebody is filming me somewhere, even if they're not. I just assume it. So you *act accordingly*’. This coheres strongly with symbolic interactionist perspectives and Mead’s (1934/2009) concept of the ‘generalized other’, analogous to Freud’s ‘superego’, brought into play when a social actor imagines what is expected of her or him by wider society and societal norms, and how s/he *should* act in the circumstances. As high-profile public figures, about whom there might be a considerable framework of information publicly available, professional athletes may well feel a strong pull of social obligation. For Goffman (1974), the idea of ‘acting accordingly’ relates classically to the way a social interactional order is maintained by co-present individuals meeting situational needs. Professional athletes understood the necessity of a tightly regulated presentation of self in order to maintain appropriate ‘face’ in social encounters, both front stage and back stage from the sporting arena, even when their sense of privacy might feel invaded in the latter. We next consider the strategies that athletes adopted in their efforts to secure front-region control and meet performance requirements.

Acting in character

In a study of celebrity, Rockwell and Giles (2009) refer to the notion of ‘character splitting’ as a defense mechanism, a psycho-social strategy to explain how celebrities present an image of themselves that can be contrasted to a more ‘authentic’ understanding of who they ‘really’ are, and how they actually feel. As a cricketer noted: ‘It’s almost like my life was made up of acting and when I got home, I shut the doors, then I was myself’. Relatedly, McCann (1988), in his study of Marilyn Monroe/Norma Jeane Baker, similarly analyzes how ‘Marilyn’ was a worked-at creation, very much perceived as ‘performance’ by Norma Jeane Baker, who would often refer to ‘Marilyn’ in the third person, thus engaging in explicit role-distancing (Goffman, 1961) from this character she performed. An analogous character-splitting and acknowledgement of the need to perform a certain character was identified by many of the professional athletes interviewed; for example, a rugby player indicated:

They don’t meet *me*. I’ve got a Jekyll and Hyde personality. They meet who I believe has a responsibility to the club as my employer. I think you have to portray the club and yourself a certain way. So I don’t often drink in public. The younger lads will finish a game and go into town. Me, back to [home town], there’s no one out in [home town]. It’s *safe*.

The idea of ‘safe’ space reverberates with Goffman’s analysis of back-stage regions, as those regions where individuals can ‘step out of character’ (Goffman, 1974: 115) at least in terms of more front-stage presentations, where actors are deliberately and intentionally seeking to display a certain character, for example, via facial and bodily expressions and styles of talk. Through impression management,

professional athletes dramaturgically ‘realize’ their character and seek to project a particular image, as a cricketer articulated, noting the dramaturgical work required:

It’s almost like you put on ... not a show, but you put on a perception of yourself to almost be ‘[name] the cricketer’. You know, not that I wouldn’t not do it, but you make a conscious effort if someone speaks to you to be polite back, or if someone wants something signed, a shirt, you try your best to do it, even though sometimes you can’t really be arsed. But that’s because you’re always guarded, in the sense that this is a reflection of me as a cricketer, so I don’t want people to badmouth me or say, ‘he’s an arrogant pr**k’, or ‘he didn’t have the time of day’ ... So you’re always thinking about the impact it has on your image.

Front-stage responses, such as those exemplified in the above quote, also constitute protective fronts, whereby the social actor seeks to present a professional social identity and thus to shield her/himself from revealing a more personal ‘inner’ self. A footballer referred to such protective acts by noting how:

I just put up a shield, a persona that people would say ... I was of some sort of confidence ya know, all of a sudden a mask, another persona ... not letting people see the other side.

This kind of deliberative interactional performance was designed to present a particular appearance, with the aim of fulfilling moral requirements of the work role

of professional athletes. Interviewees were highly cognizant of the performance demands upon them, and the interactional expectations of their audience:

You have this conditioned way of speaking to people, because you know it's what they want to hear (rugby player)

It's almost like ticking boxes, making sure that you come across right ... you want to be seen as a good figure (cricketer)

At times, the emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) required to act in character as a professional athlete was considerable; participants reported being intensely aware of front-stage acting requirements, including engaging in 'fake' upbeat, positive presentations to hide the more difficult reality of back-stage life: 'Because you're on show so often you can't show any signs of weakness ... *you have to fake it*, you have to paint the picture that everything is great. And it never is', a swimmer admitted. Performance pressures could push athletes to the limits of their presentational resources, and the same swimmer added: 'I remember ... breaking down in hotel rooms petrified about going out to race, and thinking that I had to do it ... yes, you have to put the mask on and out you go'.

Revolving stages

Although it was not raised as a direct question, all participants discussed in-depth their felt need to present in front regions what they themselves considered a *faux* social self, and noted how this coping strategy was associated with hiding their more 'authentic' personal feelings from audiences. This might have connotations of

cynicism, one might think, but for Goffman (1974) the term ‘cynical’ was reserved only for those with no belief in their own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of their audience. The athletes, in contrast, seemed very committed to an effective presentation of their professional roles. In this regard, hotel rooms and changing rooms could provide the liminal space between back-stage and front-stage regions, allowing the actor to ‘get into role’ and prepare to move front stage. It should, however, be emphasized that back regions are not necessarily fixed spatio-temporally, and what is often construed as the back stage can require presentational work as intensive as that of performing front stage, as a cricketer described:

You go in there [changing room] with a real positive mind-set. And ... it’s like an act. You put an act on in the changing room, and you put this whole positive front on, where you can feel really bad inside, but it’s a positive frontline ... it can be a little bit fake.

The same cricketer was explicit in noting the ongoing presentational and ‘political’ work required in what might be thought of as the back region of the changing room:

I think people have a perception of what a changing room would be like, but I don’t think they’d have a clue of how political, how many agendas, and how backstabbing it can be. What you tell people is just a very glossy finished outlook of sport.

For all interviewees, it became evident that their professional role performances did not end when leaving the sporting arena; there was no respite from role expectations

in the changing-room context. Rather, the athletes described having to be ‘switched on’ at almost all times; in a state of constant performance ‘readiness’ as a professional athlete: to meet people – fans, work colleagues, employers, some family members – and to be ‘in role’ in these encounters. As a consequence of this ‘contamination’ (Finch, 1983) of social spaces often perceived by others as putatively ‘private’ spaces available for relaxation and general back-stage behavior, athletes came to define many social contexts as requiring ongoing dramaturgical work; work that was very demanding in terms of time and energy. As a cricketer remarked: ‘No matter how supported or what experience you’ve gone through, I think, yes, it’s a difficult, it can be a bit of a spiral ... It takes a lot of energy to put on an act’. Indeed, so physically and mentally draining could the demands of presentational work be, that some participants described intense somatic consequences. A rugby player said:

You go into the corporate room afterwards and meet people and after 15 minutes of talking I’d suffer some lower back spasms. I would have to go and sit down in the cornered off area and I really struggled with this. It would happen when I walked in this room and it was this sort of psychosomatic injury to get me away from having to have these conversations, which were more like faux intimate conversations.

There’s so much falseness about it.

Not surprisingly, therefore, seeking out back regions where they could find some respite from these heavy dramaturgical demands was difficult, but physically and mentally essential for these athletes.

Seeking the back stage

The dramaturgical front stage is, for Goffman (1974), supported by corresponding back regions: spatio-temporal zones where people can temporarily escape performative role demands of front regions (Collins, 1994). Data analysis identified that the professional athletes struggled to locate such back-stage regions as ‘safe’ spaces in which to relax and unwind. In a manner analogous to fashion models (see Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006), high profile athletes cannot easily step away from their work roles or remove their uniforms to achieve anonymity and relative privacy as can other workers who, for example, remove factory or shop overalls, or medical uniforms to signal transition away from the occupational role. The work-life boundary is often permeable, shifting, and complex (see also Allen-Collinson et al., 2019).

This need to escape to the privacy of a safe haven to engage in back-stage behavior, or ‘to be under the radar’ as a cricketer described, was expressed in various ways by interviewees, and was particularly acute following front-stage performances they deemed less successful, when athletes wanted above all to be left alone. As a cricketer portrayed:

You just shut yourself away, you don’t want to see anybody, you don’t want to go out for dinner. You sit there, you order room service, you stare at a TV screen, not really knowing what’s going on. Just thinking about, ‘why did I do that?’ or ‘what if that had happened?’

Employment contracts often required athletes to be away from home and family, including being on extended tours, so hotel rooms became temporary ‘home’, as exemplified by the quote above. Even when participants were able to escape to the

back-stage of their domestic home, some reported needing a back region *behind* what might be considered a back region in itself. As a cricketer noted, even when at home, they needed to escape from dramaturgical performance demands, to ‘be in my own little bubble’, when returning from matches, withdrawing from even basic interactional contexts with his partner:

I wouldn’t talk to [partner] and I’d just go off to bed, get up in the morning and go. And so I’d be there, but she wouldn’t really see me for days. It was difficult.

Furthermore, for many, the highly specific performance demands of their occupational roles meant that significant others were limited in the degree of understanding they had of a partner’s or other family member’s lived experience:

I talk about elements ... but it can get quite frustrating, because you know actually that they’re saying what they think is the right thing. But to you, there’s this underlying current that they just don’t understand. You don’t really get what I’m going through. You don’t really get what it feels like.

Analogously, a rugby player admitted:

The only time I’ve felt there is complete understanding is with people who have been in similar positions. But even [wife] doesn’t appreciate it. She knows I work hard, but I don’t think even she appreciates the demands of the job.

The intense emotional labor required of professional athletes, not only when performing in the full glare of the front-stage public sporting arena, but also in regions often considered more back stage, such as changing rooms, restaurants (as customers), and private houses, meant that these athletes often had little energy left to devote to the emotion work of intimate relationships, family life or friendships.

Concluding thoughts

Drawing on a comparatively rare qualitative data set, thematically and thoroughly analysed, this exploratory study is the first to examine the *workplace* experiences of highly publicly-visible professional athletes. Goffman's conceptualization of social regions offers a highly apposite framework for addressing the lived experiences of professional athletes, whose working spaces do not fall neatly into 'public' and 'private' realms (Adler and Adler, 1989). For the high-profile athletes studied, there was an overwhelming and unremitting sense of having to be perpetually 'performance-ready'. Interviewees repeatedly highlighted their need to 'escape' front regions, and identified intense difficulties in securing a safe back-stage haven where they could temporarily cast off dramaturgical demands of the front stage. Their inability to find people who were not preoccupied with, or who cognitively foregrounded, the athletes' occupational role, compounded these difficulties. For these professional athletes, social spaces in which they can be 'recognized' and treated as 'open persons', and therefore are role-obliged to engage in front-stage dramaturgical work, can extend far beyond those usually considered as the workplace. Correspondingly, back-stage regions are diminished in extent and availability, and finding safe, secure, private spaces in which to relax, is found to be increasingly

difficult. Lewin and Reeves (2011) suggest that the activities that take place in private settings are seen as crucial in supporting the activities that occur in public settings. This raises the question for us as to whether back regions are only effective as relaxation spaces when athletes are in co-presence with people who comprehend the psychological and dramaturgical strains of employment in their type of work. This original exploration of the *public* character of athlete identities also raises additional significant questions related to the health, welfare and dignity of such frontline employees. We have identified at least three further lines of enquiry within which important research questions are identifiable.

First, every research participant discussed the ways in which the use of social media is now recognized as a mechanism for a boundary-less flow of ideas, speculation, reaction and judgement throughout wider networks of social interdependencies. This largely unrestricted and endless circulation of opinion raises serious debate connected to: (i) athletes' personal use of social media – some interviewees referenced athletes with multiple public and private accounts across numerous devices; and (ii) what we inferred to be a potentially damaging egocentric addiction to seeking out personal citation, which may unwittingly render athletes-as-workers as 'open' in ways Goffman could not have foreseen.

Second, in a number of interviews, our interpretation of data led us to contemplate the rather health-compromising circumstances for athletes relating to their search for *off-regions*, social spaces they perceived as free from work role demands. This search, which may result in a growing sense of social isolation, appears nonetheless to be uneasily juxtaposed to the potential risks of loneliness that threaten notions of good mental health. Even though athletes were embedded within wider sporting and occupational communities, issues related to social isolation and

feelings of loneliness are, we consider, significant. There is certainly a current gap in understanding of the longer-term health implications for athletes who repeatedly, and as a coping mechanism, feel obliged to seek out 'aloneness', even though this may over time accentuate feelings of isolation, which may underpin athlete low mood or even depression.

Third, whilst the project did not focus on athlete health specifically, nevertheless issues concerning work and mental health were implicit throughout and evidenced in data that highlighted the mental weariness and utter exhaustion that accrued from the lack of respite from occupational role demands, and the sense for athletes that they were '*always on*'. The lives of professional athletes could feel engulfed by the demands of emotional and dramaturgical labor, and the lack of opportunity for expressing other identities.

Tellingly, in much academic research, it is challenges to, and felt loss of, athletic identity, that feature prominently in accounts of anxiety and depression often occasioned by events such as injury, illness, de-selection or retirement, which lead to the loss of active involvement in athletic performances (e.g., Rice et al., 2016). Relatively under-examined and under-theorized, however, are the psychological and corporeal demands and health consequences of dramaturgical performances that are ineluctable features of the lives of professional athletes. Academic interest in elite sport has tended to focus primarily on career disruptions, 'punctuation marks' and epiphanies, involving various kinds of material and symbolic loss. Athlete welfare policies, where they exist, tend to cohere around specific career transitions and post-career educational opportunities (Lavalley, 2019). There remains a research lacuna in terms of conceptualizing mundane, everyday ways of being for professional athletes, and the health costs of being a professional athlete, outside of the more well-known

health problems of injury. This may be in part due to the construction of professional sport as *a labour of love* (Roderick, 2006), a ‘calling’ about which assumptions are made concerning its revered meaning and purpose. This research offers, therefore, a contrasting, original and nuanced perspective to the often-assumed personal and social significance and supposed symbolic gratification associated with being a professional athlete. It draws attention to what can be exhausting dramaturgical demands on high-profile, professional athletes, who are required to be ‘on’ and ‘performance ready’ in such a wide range of social situations, including those often conceptualized by other workers as back regions and ‘downtime’. As one participant poignantly admitted: ‘I just want to be left alone’.

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¹ There is not the scope in this article to examine social media interaction in any depth, but for those athletes with social media accounts this social space constitutes another front region for presentation of self.